



**City of Fayetteville
Employee Focus Groups
May 2017**

**Summary Report &
Consultant Recommendations**
Submitted by Marcia Shepherd Johnson

Introduction & Overview

On May 2, 3 & 4, 2017, the consultant, Marcia Shepherd Johnson, met with cross-sections of the employees of the City of Fayetteville to facilitate **Employee Focus Groups**. The purpose for conducting focus groups was to engage employees in a thoughtful discussion of how the organization could improve employee morale and retention. Specifically, the intent was to gain a deeper understanding of the employees' perceptions of the why the four lowest scoring areas on the 2016 **Employee Survey** (conducted in late fall of 2016) were rated so poorly by employees across the organization, and what they thought could be done to improve organizational performance in those areas.

Why the use of Focus Groups? Originally called “focused interviews,” it is a form of **qualitative** research consisting of interviews in which a group of people are asked about their **perceptions, opinions, beliefs, or attitudes toward** a certain service, product or concept. In this case, they were to delve deeper into employee **perceptions** about what is negatively affecting the City of Fayetteville workforce and why.

The four lowest scoring categories of the Employee Survey were:

1. **Employee Appreciation**
2. **Communication Between Leadership and Frontline Employees**
3. **Process for Dealing with Poor Performance**
4. **Overall Sharp Decline in Employee Job Satisfaction After Five Years of Employment**

Process for Employee Selection

The staff of the Office of Strategic Performance Analytics informed the Senior Management Team of the purpose for conducting the focus groups, and what was to be achieved by gathering employee feedback. The departments were asked to send at least one employee to each of the six focus group sessions that were scheduled (unless they had fewer than six employees). They were told that the goal was to have a good “cross section” of employees from different ranks and roles, and preferably ones that would fully participate in sharing their honest and open feedback.

The following departments sent at least one of their employees to participate, even if they did not send one to each session:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Airport | • Eng. & Infrastructure | • Parks & Rec |
| • City Attorney's Office | • Finance | • Permits & Inspections |
| • City Manager's Office | • Fire/Emergency Mgmt. | • Police & 911 Call Center |
| • Community Dev. | • HRD/ODT | • Street Maintenance |
| • Corp. Communications | • I.T. | • Transit |

Although employees from the **Environmental Services** department were unable to participate in the scheduled focus groups, they were provided the opportunity to meet with a staff member of the Office of Strategic Performance Analytics and share their feedback on what was and was not going well in the organization. Their responses were included in the overall focus group data and feedback.

Process for Conducting the Focus Groups

The six focus groups were conducted on May 2, 3 and 4, 2017, with two sessions conducted each day from 9:00-11:00 am and 2:00-4:00 p.m. A total of **63 employees** participated in the six sessions. Attendance was as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| May 2, 9:00 am = 11 participants | May 2, 2:00 pm = 6 participants |
| May 3, 9:00 am = 14 participants | May 3, 2:00 pm = 9 participants |
| May 4, 9:00 am = 12 participants | May 4, 2:00 pm = 11 participants |

Participants were asked to sign-in as they arrived, and were briefed on why they were asked to participate in the focus group session and what the goals were for the meetings. As the four lowest scoring areas of the 2016 Employee Survey were shared with participants, they were asked to share their individual perspectives and discuss as a group the possible root causes for the issues, and what could be done to make things better.

One important concept that was introduced (or reinforced) was the organization's desire to be a "Learning Organization." A term coined by Peter Senge, the "father" of organizational development, it is used to describe an organization that fosters continuous growth and learning through by examining any given situation or issue to learn what happened, why it happened, and what can be done in the future to achieve a better outcome. Research has shown that organizations can collectively shape a more positive future by learning from past and current problems through open and honest dialogue with employees at all levels, and

tapping into employee problem solving and innovation. The organization that learns together is more able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and economic drivers. It is really the only way to successfully overcome obstacles and maintain a close-knit, fully engaged workforce. Therefore, employees were encouraged to be honest and open in their responses, and that the comments would be kept anonymous, although the group responses would be shared.

Focus Group Questions

There were eight questions designed to engage employees in a lively discussion of their perceptions of what was going well and not-so-well within the City of Fayetteville organization. The questions worked well at drawing out lots of discussion from the groups. In fact, several participants mentioned that they wished they had more time to spend discussing the issues. Many made positive comments and were relieved that the sessions were facilitated in a constructive way.

Their feedback was useful in providing perspective on the employee's perceptions regarding **Employee Support & Appreciation, Supervision & Leadership, Communication & Feedback, Performance Management**, and insight into why **Employee Morale** declined sharply after five years of employment. The questions used to illicit responses from the focus group participants were:

“From your perspective (whether just in your department or across the organization):”

- 1. What is going well?***
- 2. What is not going well?***
- 3. How would you describe your work culture or environment?***
- 4. How would you describe the morale in your department?***
- 5. How often are you provided the opportunity to be innovative, and what kind of work environment encourages you to be innovative?***
- 6. Why do you think morale declines after 5 years of employment?***
- 7. What would you like to tell the City's leaders, to improve employee work life?***
- 8. What do you need in order to better meet customer needs?***

Participant Responses to Focus Group Questions

Questions 1 & 2:

The first two questions of the meeting were used both as a way to gather information and to serve as an “icebreaker” for participants. The participants were asked to introduce themselves and tell the group what their job/role was and how long he/she had worked for the City. They were also asked to share one positive thing that they saw as “going well” within the organization and one thing that they saw as “not going well.”

By using this technique, it engaged the participants quickly into the discussion and did not allow for people to retreat into silence. Each person fully engaged in the activity and shared their perspective easily and cooperatively. As each person shared, the facilitator captured their responses on chart paper—one for the positives and one for the negatives. After the focus group meetings, the facilitator coded and categorized all responses into general “keyword” categories:

| KEYWORD CATEGORIES | | | |
|--|--|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Budget | 7. Employee Drive & Accomplishment | 13. Job Security & Longevity | 20. Supervision & Leadership |
| 2. Career Growth & Advancement | 8. Employee Fairness & Equity | 14. Organizational Growth & Change | 21. Teamwork |
| 3. City Council (CC) | 9. Employee Morale & Turnover | 15. Materials & Equipment | 22. Training & Ed |
| 4. City Manager’s Office (CMO) | 10. Employee Support & Appreciation | 16. Pay & Benefits | 23. Work Environment |
| 5. Communication & Feedback | 11. Employee Talent, Skills & Innovation | 17. Performance Management | 24. Workload & Staffing |
| 6. Customer Service & Community Engagement | 12. Interdepartmental Relations | 18. Policies & Processes | |

The Top Three Responses to Question #1: “What is going well in the organization?”

1. Teamwork
2. Supervision & Leadership
3. Training & Education

Teamwork: When given the opportunity to share what they thought was going well in the organization, many of the participants said they had a good team of folks with which to work, and that their team helped and supported each other to solve problems and keep up with the heavy workload. When one looks at the detailed data (included in Appendix I), one can see that many of the high marks received for Teamwork came from different people who attended different focus groups, but *work for the same department*.

Supervision & Leadership: The same is true for those who said positive things about Supervision & Leadership, as well as Employee Morale & Turnover. Though the comments may have come from different people, attending different focus groups, many of the positive remarks come from people of the same department. One can look through those comments and see which departments have good teamwork and whose members have respect and good relations with their leadership team.

One standout example in the positive comments section is the Airport. Clearly, the department director and assistant director have a close knit team who greatly appreciate their director’s demonstration of good communication, employee support and appreciation, and clear, consistent guidance. The director sent an employee to every single focus group, and every employee that participated said they had a great team, great leadership, and felt like they were valued by their director and the rest of the team members.

Training & Education: The positive comments regarding Training & Education were spread out from among people from different departments. Participants from Corporate Communications, Fire, HRD, P&R, Police, I.T. and others, noted their appreciation for any and all training opportunities that they’ve had, and voiced how important training was to their ability to grow and learn in their jobs.

Top Three Responses to Question #2: “What is not going well in the organization?”

1. **Workload & Staffing**
2. **Supervision & Leadership**
3. **Employee Morale & Turnover**

Workload & Staffing: The number one thing that employees cited as not going well in the organization was their workload. Participants voiced their frustrations at being overloaded with work and having too few staff members on their team to effectively meet the daily demands placed on them. Because their teams are short staffed, many have to work overtime every week. Some participants even made a link between the overwhelming stress of being short staffed and the high rate of depression and mental health problems, family issues, and turnover on their teams.

- *“The performance expectations are too high for the number of personnel and the heavy workload! There just aren’t enough people ... we need twice the number of staff”*
- *“We are practically on call 24/7 ... it absorbs everything in your entire life, negatively affecting our private lives. People are getting burned out and wanting to leave. We need more personnel strength – more people! We have go to find a way to get more people and reduce work hours in order to bring more work/life balance or people are going to burn out and leave.*

The discussion of workload issues was emotional and almost a call for help. The employee’s perception is that their concerns are not being heard, and help is NOT on the way. This theme was repeated throughout the various focus group sessions. Good employees are desperate for City leadership to understand how overwhelmed they feel and that things cannot continue going as they are. The concept of “doing more with less” has been used with City employees for far too many years now. There comes a point where employees cannot do their jobs unless teams have more people, more equipment, and more help provided. Some are a couple of examples of comments:

- *The Police Department is so understaffed, that they have put police officers with only 1 year of experience in charge of new recruits. With the social perceptions of police being so negative across the United States, the department has had difficulty recruiting and keeping Police Officers, making it hard to fill vacant positions.*

- In the Fire Department, Engine companies used to consist of 5 people; but because of cut-backs and personnel shortages, the teams only have 3 people doing the same work of what used to take 5 people. On top of that, emergency calls have increased due to the opium epidemic and drug overdoses, leaving staff members overwhelmed and discouraged.
- Personnel from other departments like Transit and the 911 Call Center cite incidences where they cannot take time off even though they have leave time, because there is no one to backfill them; in some incidences, employee “call outs” have risen dramatically because there is no other way to be able to take time off for important family or personal events.

Supervision & Leadership: Many commented that the City’s **Supervision and Leadership** needs improvement. Many of the negative comments referred to supervisors who were not approachable and ineffective in their roles as supervisors. Employees must depend on their supervisors to be the link between themselves and the higher-ups in the organization. Without an effective supervisor, they do not get the communication and guidance they need to do their best work. They expect the supervisors to listen to their feedback, help solve problems on the team, and overcome obstacles that stand in the way of getting the job done. A few participants noted a lack of trust in their supervisor to manage employee performance fairly and with equity.

- “One of the supervisors is not approachable to employees; they don’t feel like they can go to him to get help in fixing even simple things, like getting a new phone.”
- “The two-way communication between the higher levels and the lower levels needs to be improved, where upper levels receive feedback from the lower levels. Supervisors need more training in how to communicate with employees ... they have a rank mentality.”
- “Middle management act like ‘my way or the high way;’ if you ask them ‘why’ or challenge them they then think negatively of you.”
- “Inconsistent quality of supervisors—some are horrible, some are good. Supervisors are inconsistent with how they deliver or correction.”

Current business research has shown that the number one reason people leave a job is because they are unhappy working for their supervisor. A good supervisor improves morale, facilitates good communication, and effectively and fairly manages employee performance.

But without well trained supervisors, everything else starts to crumble and employee morale begins to sour.

Employee Morale & Turnover: Maintaining high employee morale (or engagement) is critical to the success of any organization. The challenge is that it mostly rests on the shoulders of supervisors. Therefore, the organization must have well trained supervisors who understand modern day management principles and have the “people skills” to connect with the members on their teams.

Back in the 1990’s, the Gallup, Inc. organization published a list called “The 12 Elements of Great Managing,” Later, these elements served as the foundation for an Employee Engagement survey created by the Gallup organization to measure employee morale or engagement, and has been used throughout the world ever since. This simple survey, the “Gallup Q12” portrays the direct link between employee morale and good supervision/management. In fact, it is easy to see by looking at the 12 simple statements why so many supervisors fail at what is a fairly straight forward approach:

Gallup Q12

1. I know what is expected of me at work
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development
7. At work, my opinions seem to count
8. The mission or purpose of my company (organization) makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work
10. I have a best friend at work
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow

The statements highlighted in yellow are the areas in which, according to employee feedback, supervisors are struggling. If supervisors were not struggling, it is likely that there would not be so much negative feedback from participants regarding these issues. It is important to make the connection between poor Supervision and Leadership and low employee morale. Employee perceptions will not improve without a plan for supervisors to improve their own leadership performance in the areas listed above. Every supervisor throughout the organization has a direct responsibility to improve their employees’ morale by providing the leadership practices listed above.

Question #3: How would you describe your work culture or environment?

The next question, Question #3, was used as a small group activity. Participants were divided into groups of 3 or 4 people and asked to chart paper the positive words/phrases and negative words/phrases that described their work environment. Each small group then had the opportunity to share their responses with the larger group and explain why. After the focus group meetings, the facilitator coded, categorized, and counted all small group responses. The following is the list of the top responses:

| | |
|---|---|
| TOP POSITIVE RESPONSES: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work Environment (13) 2. Employee Drive & Accomplishments (12) 3. Teamwork, Comradery (10) 4. Workload & Staffing (8) & Org. Growth & Change (8) | TOP NEGATIVE RESPONSES: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employee Morale & Turnover (15) 2. Workload & Staffing (11) 3. Supervision/Leadership (9) & Work Environment (9) 4. Communication & Feedback (8) & Interdepartmental Relations (8) |
|---|---|

The top negative response to the question was **Employee Morale & Turnover**. Low morale is like a cancer that eats away an organization from the inside. The sad thing is that there are usually signs that arise early on that go unnoticed or unaddressed. If poor morale is acknowledged and proper interventions put in place early on, then morale can be improved. However, as mentioned previously, employee morale is directly linked to the quality of supervision employees receive. If supervisors are not skilled enough to recognize low morale early on, and know what to do to turn it around, then it will not improve. Middle managers and executive leaders must pay close attention to their frontline supervisors to ensure they have the leadership skills necessary to build employee morale. Failure to do so may lead to people leaving their jobs and eventually lead the team into crisis.

It is not a coincidence that the next top three negative responses under Employee **Morale & Turnover**, is **Workload and Staffing**, **Supervision/Leadership**, and **Work Environment**. There is a *negative synergy* between these things that together, makes the situation seem impossible to good, hardworking, employees.

For example, the employee has no control over the **Workload & Staffing** issues that have a negative impact on employees. Employees depend upon their supervisors to communicate the workload and staffing issues to middle managers, who in turn need to be able to effectively communicate the problem to their department director, who then must convey the gravity of the situation to the City Manager's Office. The entire organization depends

upon the City Manager to effectively make the case to City Council that employees are overwhelmed and understaffed. Unfortunately, city councils are notorious for thinking that departments can do “more with less” ... until they can’t, and a crisis develops.

One of the Gallop Q12 statements is, “At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.” But when workloads are too much and expectations are too high to meet, even the best employees find themselves failing to get it all done, to no fault of their own. It is an important observation that, employees who have the strongest drive and desire to achieve excellence have a very low threshold for tolerating failure. When those high-achieving employees find themselves put in a situation to fail, to no fault of their own, they will go looking for other employment opportunities, where they can be successful. However, employees with a lower need for personal achievement, but a higher need for job security, will more readily accept the fact that they are unable to meet the increasing demands, and will simply “coast” along, meeting minimum standards (or worse) just to stay employed. Over time, the organization can become dominated by those who “coast,” while the highly driven employees leave to go to work someplace where their desire for excellence is supported and they can be successful.

Communication & Feedback was also mentioned several times with negative terms. Employees need and want more two-way communication from their supervisors and leaders, the City Manager, and City Council. As subject matter experts, they want the opportunity to provide their feedback in a constructive way, in order to help the organization successfully meet its challenges. But many feel that they are not given the opportunity to have a voice. They often cited “not knowing what is going on” or “never being asked for our ideas” as part of their frustration with working for the City. They believe this is an area that needs to be improved throughout the organization, from top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top. It also links to the Q12 statement, “I know what is expected of me at work.” The employees need good communication flow in order to know what is expected and what is happening around them. Good communication and employee feedback builds a stronger, more loyal workforce.

Question #4: How would you describe the morale in your department?

For this question, participants remained in their small groups, while each person shared how they would rate the morale in their department, and why. This allowed them to talk with each other about their experiences before sharing their viewpoint with the larger group. Participants were asked to rate the morale in their department on a scale of 1-10, with “10” being “fantastic” or “awesome” and “1” being “horrible.” Ratings ranged from “9” to as low as “.09.” The facilitator added all individual ratings together and divided by 56 (the number of individual responses) to arrive at the **Participant Average Rating of 5.78**. All negative words/phrases were coded and categorized by keywords, and the number of responses per category tallied:

RANKING OF NEGATIVE COMMENTS:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Communication & Feedback (12) | 8. City Council (3) |
| 2. Workload & Staffing (9) | 9. Work Environment (3) |
| 3. Employee Support & Appreciation (7) | 10. Performance Management (3) |
| 4. Employee Morale & Turnover (7) | 11. Organizational Growth & Change (2) |
| 5. Supervision & Leadership (7) | 12. Employee Fairness & Equity (2) |
| 6. Pay & Benefits (6) | 13. Interdepartmental Relations (2) |
| 7. Career Growth & Advancement (4) | 14. City Manager's Office (1) |
| | 15. Materials & Equipment (1) |

Many of the same concerns that came from discussions of previous questions and the 2016 Employee Survey, were reiterated again. Many employees are unhappy with the quality and quantity of **Communication & Feedback**, **Workload & Staffing** challenges, lack of **Employee Support & Appreciation**, weak **Supervision & Leadership**, and poor **Pay & Benefits**. Employee perceptions are that overall, pay is too low for the workload, with too few raises. Examples of comments included:

- “Most (employees) are counting the time they have left until they can retire. Pay is at its worst. Paid training is hard to get for the lower (level employees).”
- “Great place to work, but no room for promotions or pay raises.”

Question 5: How often are you provided the opportunity to be innovative? What kind of work environment encourages you to be innovative?

The participants were asked to discuss their perspectives on this question with others in their small group, and chart their individual and group answers, and then share their thoughts with the the larger group. The facilitator coded, categorized, and counted all response in the keyword categories.

Most employees said, “**Yes,**” **they did have the opportunity to be innovative in their jobs.** Several participants even said their jobs “required” them to problem-solve and be innovative on a daily basis. Participants described the type of work environment that encouraged innovation and problem-solving, and following are the top responses:

Top Employee Responses for Describing an Innovative Environment:

1. **Supervisors** that ask for employee feedback and ideas, and create a work environment that is open and not blaming
2. **Open, two-way communication** between COF leadership, from CM’s Office to Department Directors, Managers and Supervisors; employees cannot participate in coming up with innovative ideas if they do not know the manger’s intent, or are not kept “in the loop” and if their ideas are not solicited
3. **Employees want to know they are being “listened to,”** whether that means the supervisors need to improve their active listening skills, or the organization needs to do a better job of demonstrating value to employee concerns, ideas, and collaborative input. This goes for the City Council, City Manager’s Office, and the Departments. With major changes and growth affecting every single department, employee subject matter experts (SMEs) want the opportunity to inject in the planning phase of major projects before it is too late and plans are finalized. Doing so would lower the risk of problems arising during the implementation phase that could have been easily avoided if the input of employee SME’s was asked for early on.

Question 6: Why do you think morale declines after 5 years of employment?

Participants returned to their seats and the facilitator lead the entire group in the discussion of this question. Participant responses were charted, as well as any ideas they had as to what could be done to change the organization in such a way as to increase the incentive for people to stay.

Although there were negative things discussed, it was done so in the spirit of wanting to improve the organization. It was a great example of the level of professionalism of COF employees in modeling “The Learning Organization” principles. They were not criticizing or “tearing down” the organization in a destructive, non-helpful way, but on the contrary, were engaging in genuine, honest discussion about the problems and what they believe is hindering employee morale and making them want to leave. All participant responses were charted, coded, and categorized them into keyword groups, and the responses per category counted and ranked.

TOP RESPONSES:

1. **Pay & Benefits (13)**
2. **Work Environment (10)**
3. **Performance Management (7)**
4. **Career Growth & Advancement (5)**

As mentioned in the results for Question 5, pay is a central issue for many employees. Their perception is that City Council is expanding and building multi-million dollar projects in the community, but not investing in their own workforce. Some stated that they think some of the high level leaders view employees as “expendable.” But employee turnover is expensive, both in recruiting and selection expenses, and in the loss of organizational continuity defined by specific knowledge, skills and training of experienced employees. Therefore, their perception must be taken seriously.

One issue linked to Employee Pay and Benefits was mentioned a few times during the focus group discussions was the loss of **Longevity Pay**. Before the **Pay-for-Performance** program began, employees received extra pay called **Longevity Pay** that provided additional pay for long term employment with the city, starting at the five year mark. Some employees felt **Longevity Pay** showed value to those employees who stayed with the City through the years, and were sorry for the loss of that program. However, longevity programs are no longer considered best practice in Human Resources Management and have been replaced with other types of reward programs.

On another note, many employees expressed great disappointment in how the **Pay-for-Performance** program has failed to deliver as promised. The program requires lengthy and more complicated Performance Evaluations that require written justifications by supervisors to recommend their employees to receive an “Exceeds Expectations” rating on their annual performance review in order to receive a higher pay raise. But apparently the City has not provided enough funding for the extra pay associated with the program. In fact, though the program was supposed to be a way to incentivize high achieving employees, it has had the opposite effect. Employee’s perception is that it is practically impossible to receive an “Exceeds Expectations” rating, and even if they did, that there will never be enough money to make the pay raises of anything substantial. To them, it feels like a slap in the face for a job well done. Even if there was more money for the program, many supervisors are not skilled enough in their Performance Management skills to write an adequate justification for the employees that truly deserve “Exceeds,” and therefore they avoid advocating for those employees who actually deserve it. The truth is, with the heavy workloads, long hours and little appreciation from the organization, many employees feel like they work their “butt off” only to receive a “Meets Expectations” rating on the annual evaluation, which makes them feel like “why bother.”

Pay-for-Performance programs that work in Business and Industry do not translate well into public service organizations. In fact, the Human Resources Director who was in place when the program was adopted by City Council at the time, warned of the problems associated with Pay-for-Performance programs, and explained that the only way the program could be successful was if enough funding was allotted each year to adequately pay for employee raises. Unfortunately, the Council proceeded to implement the program, and has never fully funded it since.

Question 7: What would you like to tell the City's leaders, to improve employees work life?

This was the final question of the session. "City leaders" was defined as City Council Members, City Manager's Office staff, and Senior Management Team Members. Since employees many times feel that City leaders are not listening to their concerns, the question gave them a forum to share their thoughts in a non-threatening environment. The facilitator charted participant responses, which were coded, categorized by keywords, and counted.

Top Responses:

- 1. Communication & Feedback (12)**
- 2. City Council (12)**
- 3. Employee Support & Appreciation (8)**
- 4. Supervision/Leadership (5)**

Employees clearly want more information from their leaders, including what decisions are being made, why, and how it will affect them. They don't want to read about in the Newspaper, or be left to make assumptions about how a new Council initiative will impact their work area. They expect their City Manager, Department Directors, and supervisors to share information with the employees impacted by changes and leadership decisions.

Employee frustration with the lack communication is closely linked to how they feel about City Council. They do not feel like Council does a very good job of soliciting feedback from employees before making major decisions and committing to major projects, despite the impact of those decisions on employees. Lack of communication has led to lot of assumptions throughout all levels of the organization. Some employees are fearful and resentful that they are not being kept informed or consulted about major projects like the new Baseball Field, Transit Center, Skate Park, Parks & Rec Bond, and Downtown Expansion, and how those projects will impact the employees responsible for the work to be done. Here are a couple of examples of employee comments:

- "Where will Transit employees park when the new Transfer Center is opened? There doesn't seem to be any employee parking spaces in the design, so where will we park?"
- "Since the new baseball field will be taking up what is currently the employee parking lot, where will the employee's park? Are they building us a new employee parking lot?"
- "With the new baseball field opening, how is that going to impact Police Officers on duty? Will we need more officers downtown patrolling the area? We are already

understaffed. How is that going to work? Also, the new Skate Park ... will that require additional officers downtown?

- *“Currently our downtown closes up fairly early, so we don’t need that many Police Officers patrolling late into the middle of the night. But now that they are considering passing an ordinance that allows Bars downtown, which may stay open to 2:00 or 3:00 am, how is that going to impact Police staffing levels?”*

These are examples of the practical concerns of employees. They would like to know that City Council and the City Manager have adequately planned for the impact of new growth on city employees and staffing levels. Employees want to know that their concerns are being heard, and that they are not “last on the list” of considerations.

They also want the City Council to know that what the Council members say in public about City employees greatly affects how they feel about working for the City. They have heard Council members on several occasions speak disrespectfully to their City Manager, Department Directors and staff members, which in turn makes them feel disrespected and undervalued. They think Council members view employees as “them” instead of “us” – part of the same team. Here are some of the things that employees said:

- *“The City Council and City Manager need to have knowledge of the departments, over which you are making decisions, and not make assumptions, but instead, ask questions.”*
- *“What consultation has occurred on the bond project? No input from employees on the new facilities, which is disheartening.”*
- *“It feels like City Council is a dictatorship.”*
- *“City Council (members) shows contempt and disrespect for staff.”*
- *“Council seems to think that employees can’t get jobs elsewhere, which is damaging to the workforce ... their own leaders putting them down.”*
- *“If City Council gets a phone call from a concerned citizen, they want the department to take immediate action, if that moves the needs of some other citizen further down the list. City Council makes assumptions that are many times not true.”*

- We need to solidify the leadership in this City. We have a temporary City Manager and a temporary Police Chief. There has been too much change in leaders. People are feeling tentative about the future. Example: This year, only 30 people applied for the Police Chief Job, whereas in the past, we might have had over 100 applicants!”
- City Council has knee-jerk reactions; they continue to step out of their role and get involved in operations, which is the City Manager’s role, not theirs.
- The City Council ties the City Manager’s hands; they are supposed to let him run the City. They need to let the CM actually manage and not make public statements that undermine the organization.”

The other two categories mentioned frequently were **Employee Support and Appreciation** and **Supervision & Leadership**. The comments regarding **Employee Support and Appreciation** referred to wanting leaders to show respect for employees and be responsive to their concerns, listen to their feedback and taking positive action. The comments regarding **Supervision & Leadership** related to wanting supervisors who listen to their feedback, clearly define roles and responsibilities, share information, and provide consistent, fair leadership.

One team of city employees that voiced a need for greater care and concern from City leadership is the 911 Call Center. Call Center employees are struggling with the workload, low staffing levels, broken equipment and the lack of attention to their needs. Given that they are attached to the Police Department, their perception is that they are low on the priority list compared to Police Department staff. They feel invisible and forgotten.

Post Focus Group Participant Feedback (Session Evaluations)

After the completion of all six Focus Group Sessions, participants were emailed a **Participant Feedback Survey** to evaluate the success of the Focus Groups, with the following questions:

1. **How would you rate your overall experience as a participant in the Employee Focus Group, on a scale of 1-5?**
2. **On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think we did in making sure the Focus Group achieved its stated purpose and desired outcome, as stated at the beginning of the meeting, which was to “engage in a discussion of how the organization can improve employee morale and retention in the fiscal year and beyond?**
3. **On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your level of satisfaction with the facilitation of the meeting by our consultant? Such as, did she create a comfortable meeting atmosphere and explain things clearly? Was she friendly and respectful, and did she listen and allow people to express their thoughts? Can you tell us what the facilitator could have done better?**
4. **Can you tell us what you liked most about participating in the Focus Group?**
5. **Can you tell us what you liked least about participating in the Focus Group?**
6. **Would you be willing to participate on a city-wide Innovation & Improvement team?**

From the **63 employees** that participated in the Focus Groups, we received **31 responses--a 49% response rate**. The complete results are in **Appendix II**, which includes additional employee comments and feedback, but here is the overview:

- **54% rated the experience as a “5” – the highest rating possible, and another 25.81 rated it a “4”**
- **Regarding how well we did in achieving our purpose, 41.94% gave it a “5” rating and another 38.71% rated it a “4”; some said the only reason they didn’t give it a 5 was because we needed more time**

- *The facilitation received a rating of “5” by 70.97% of the participants, and was rated a “4” by another 25.81%.*
- *The rest of the questions were short answer questions that are very positive in content*
- *61.29% said they would be willing to serve on an Innovation Team*

The fact that employees were so willing to share their time, energy and opinions, and in addition, volunteer to serve on an Innovation Team, is a great testimony to the positive attitudes of our hardworking employees.

CONSULTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Because the issues that have been identified in this report are so intertwined, the Consultant recommends actions at all levels of the organization, to include City Council, the City Manager's Office, Senior Management Team Members, and all managers, supervisors and team leaders to improve the work environment at the City of Fayetteville. Focused action must be taken over the next two years to "tip the scales" back in the right direction or employee morale will continue to plummet and employee turnover continues to rise. Some of the recommended actions cost the organization nothing; others will be costly (and require additional funding) but necessary.

Recommendations for Organizational Leaders

1. City Council:

- a. **Speak to Employees Respectfully:** City Council members must be advised to be careful to address the City Manager and all City employees, whether in public or in private, with respect and dignity. Even if the Council Members do not intend to sound rude, condescending or disrespectful, they must increase their awareness of their tone and choice of words, so as to increase their level of professionalism in addressing City staff. Their carelessness in this area has unfortunately created a negative perception in the mind of employees, and many feel under-valued and disrespected. The only way to turn this negative perception around is for Council Members to be hyper-aware of their tone and choice of words, as well as body language. They need to convey respect, which includes the display of active listening skills, such as paying attention when someone is speaking, giving good eye contact, not interrupting, and letting the person finish their presentation or comments before the Council. If the Council is unaware of how they come across to City employees or do not understand why they are perceived negatively, then it is recommended that they go through a two hour training session in how to communicate with respect. Suggestion: Achieve Global, a combined "Basic Principles" and "Giving Feedback" module.
- b. **Never Criticize City Staff Publicly:** City Council members should be reminded of good management skills, such as "Praise in Public" and "Correct in Private." They should be advised to never make disparaging public remarks about the work that is being carried out by City employees, but rather leave

any corrective actions that are warranted to be carried out by the City Manager in private. The City Council must protect the City's public image if we are to recruit good employees to fill the job vacancies. No one wants to go to work for an organization where the highest leaders display a lack of faith and support for the workforce. Instead, it would be wise for City Council members to praise City employees regularly and publically for their sacrifices and commitment to the City of Fayetteville. Employees need to hear from Council how they are valued and respected, more than they need another awards ceremony or certificate of appreciation.

- c. **Increasing the Workforce or Decreasing the Workload:** In another six months it will be time for the City Council to start planning for the 2018-2019 Fiscal Year. It is common for City Councils to like to make big changes in the community, such as with Fayetteville's new baseball field and the new Parks & Rec bond. Those endeavors bring a lot of positive attention to the City of Fayetteville, which is great. But part of successful Project Planning is ensuring in the planning phase that the proper resources are in place to support the implementation of the plan. The feedback from city employees is very clear that they are struggling under the weight of their current workloads and the departments are lacking the funding needed to properly maintain staffing levels, as well as the training budgets needed to maintain skills. The City Council needs to consider looking more inward in the fiscal planning for 2018-2019, and provide the internal resources needed to add personnel, give employees raises, provide for healthy training budgets, and provide the software, tools and equipment needed for the organization to be healthy and sound. Otherwise all of the external projects are going to suffer qualitatively. For instance, the Finance Department and HRD are still using J.D. Edwards software, a DOS system, which by today's standards is archaic. Bringing organizational tools up to modern day needs to be a priority, even though it will be expensive. The organization needs to be fully funded if it is to meet City Council's performance expectations.
- d. **Pay-for-Performance:** The current Pay-for-Performance program is not working, and has not since implementation, because of lack of funding to award high performing employees with a substantial pay raise. As a result, it has had the exact opposite effect on employee morale, because it **does not** pay for high performance. On top of that, the current performance evaluations were designed with only three rating levels to **narrow** the

percentage of employees who could actually receive an “Exceeds Expectations,” since money is a key part of the system. If money is **not** linked to the system, then the evaluations can be changed to include five levels of performance, giving supervisors more flexibility to use the evaluations as a “pat on the back” for their employees. The recommendation would be for City Council to work with the City Manager and HRD staff to dismantle the Pay-for-Performance system and consider alternatives.

- e. **Gaining Employee Input for Council Decisions:** It would be good for Council members to try to improve employees’ perceptions of them by treating them as equal stakeholders, just as important citizens and the Council members themselves. They could show respect and value to employees by providing opportunities early in planning discussions for staff members with subject matter expertise to be included in the planning phases of new projects. For example, discussing with Police SMEs to consider the issues and unintended consequences of the downtown growth with the ballfield, employee parking, the skate park, the allowance of bars to open on Hay Street, and the expansion of the railroad to include very long trains going through the middle of all of that area. Before making important decisions that can have a huge negative impact on City staff, it would be good to gather all of that feedback before the decisions are made, and not after. It is recommended that the City Council and City Manager jointly design a decision making process that includes staff subject matter experts in the planning phase of new projects to ensure optimal results in the long term.
- f. **Solidify City Leadership:** Currently, the city has a temporary City Manager and a temporary Police Chief, which leaves employees feeling insecure as to the direction of the organization. With other Senior Management Team members considering retirement soon, these two top positions need to be permanently staffed as soon as possible. Same goes for the other positions when they come open.
- g. **Respect the Boundaries: City Council vs. City Manager’s Roles & Responsibilities:** City Council members must respect the fact that it is the City Manager’s role to manage the organization, and should not call department directors directly or directly interfere with City staff in the performance of their jobs. ALL communication and guidance **MUST** go through the City Manager’s office. Perhaps it is time to work out a process and protocol for

when citizens call City Council members to complain, as to how to handle those situations, to ensure all citizens' needs are being met.

2. City Manager's Office:

- a. Communication:** The City Manager's Office must to do a much better job of communicating to ALL employees about growth, changes, decisions, and any news that impacts them or their jobs. Department directors must be reminded of their responsibility for carrying information down to all levels in their department.

Perhaps it can be accomplished through a weekly CM email or a video-taped message that is emailed to all employees and shown in employee break rooms. The weekly video-taped recording could also be used to give praise to employees and highlight some of the excellent work being done throughout the organization. It could also be used as part of an "Employee of the Month" program, where an employee is selected, and gets to "have coffee" and be interviewed by the City Manager (and thanked), and provided a special parking place for the month.

- b. Employee Advocate:** The entire organization depends on the City Manager to provide adequate personnel, materials, tools and equipment. There are problems throughout the organization regarding the need for more staff, more funding for training, more/better equipment, tools, etc. The City Manager should consider conducting an analysis of the following:

- Department staffing levels and the cost of overtime versus hiring more employees
- Needs analysis (by department) of needed materials, equipment, tools, software/hardware (such as a replacement for JDE in Finance and HRD), etc.
- A needs analysis of proper training for supervisors
- A combined report that calculates required funding to meet the current staffing needs and restore the health of the organization to present to Council for future budget discussions

- c. Be Visible to the Employees:** Peter Drucker was a writer, consultant and business visionary who is referred to as "the inventor of modern management" for good reason. He believed in business as a human-driven enterprise that could be profitable *and* socially responsible. One of the methods he used was "**Managing by Walking Around,**" which refers to a style

of business management which involves managers wandering around, in an unstructured manner, through the workplace(s), at random, to check with employees, equipment, or on the status of ongoing work. When this tool is incorporated into a manager's weekly routine, it gives the manager an opportunity to show value to his/her employees, praise them for their work, recognize good ideas, and ask for their feedback. This method would be a wonderful tool to use with the 911 Call Center staff, where employees feel invisible and forgotten. It is a tool that was used daily by Ramon Yarborough, who between the years, 1971-2000, was the local, well-known (and liked) Publisher of the Fayetteville Observer. The employees of his organization thought it was the great that he would walk around, eat lunch with them in the break room, and always smiled and talked to the people, even at the lowest levels, who worked for the company. This method is a wonderful way to build morale and demonstrate appreciation to employees, and it costs nothing!

- d. Ensure Leadership is Sustained in the Organization:** An organization-wide method and philosophy of supervisory/leadership skills should be ingrained in all leaders in the organization through the use of formal training and skill building, and modeled and reinforced by all levels of leadership in the organization. Supervision and Leadership training should be an on-going process, where money is invested in both internal and external training programs for all supervisors. The organization cannot afford to have unskilled supervisors doing things that are destructive to employee morale and being the cause of high employee turnover rates.
- e. Break Down Department Silos:** The CMO and Department Directors must find a way to break down the communication barriers and "silo" mentality that is hindering the communication flow and cooperativeness between departments. The CM must lead the effort, while seeking feedback from the department directors on how best to make positive changes in this area.
- f. HRD Current Best Practices:** Inquire of HRD as to what their suggestions are for improving the employee pay system, benefits, the overtime policy, the employee performance evaluation form, and HR Software. Are there current trends, such as 360 Performance Reviews that might be useful to incorporate?

g. Department Directors/Managers/Supervisors and Employee Appreciation:

All leaders within the organization, whether frontline leaders or department directors, need to be constantly looking for the good work of employees to acknowledge and praise. Consider special lunches, parking spaces, or other ways to show appreciation that do not cost much.

h. Supervisors: Supervisors have the greatest direct influence on their employees' morale. The following things should be done continually:

- Ensure your employees know what is expected from them at all times
- Assess whether employees have the materials and equipment they need to be safe and do their work, and if not **advocate for your people by making their needs known to the department director**
- Give weekly praise to your people for doing good work
- Show a sincere interest in your employees, and concern for them and their families
- Encourage the career growth and development of your employees; inquire as to their needs and desires for career growth and create Career Development Plans for each employee; advocate for your employees training and development and ensure they have opportunities for learning every single year.
- Conduct Annual and Semi-Annual Performance Reviews faithfully and consistently for every employee, to include a "sit down," two-way, uninterrupted conversation with each individual person.
- Be consistent and fair in dealing with your employees; treat them the same in regard to discipline practices and career opportunities.
- Demonstrate Active Listening skills with your employees; listen to their ideas, their concerns, and their frustrations, and do your best to remove obstacles in their path and improve their chances of success.

CONCLUSION

There are no obstacles brought forth in this report that cannot be overcome. However, it will take great teamwork and self-reflection by the City's leaders. Obviously, the greatest monetary needs are the needs for staffing, raises, employee training, supervisory training, materials and equipment. But the other changes needed, in terms of employee appreciation, morale, communication, and supervisory skills, have less to do with money and everything to do with changing leadership behaviors. There are no **easy** solutions, but there **are** solutions.

The question now will be which recommendations will be accepted and action taken in the short run, versus what can be planned for improvement the next couple of years. Or will recommendations will be rejected or believed unnecessary by the leaders who make the decisions? If that happens, then no positive change will occur in those areas.

If the employee feedback provided in this report is taken seriously by the leaders, then much can be done to improve the work lives of City employees. But it will take every single supervisor, manager, department director and the CMO staff member, in partnership with the City Council members, to make the changes required to turn things around and make the City of Fayetteville a good place to work in the future.

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions: Detailed Results Data

Appendix II:
Focus Group Participant Feedback (Session Evaluations)
Detailed Data

Appendix III:
Employee Attendance/Sign-in Sheets